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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Thomas Jefferson's evolving concept of the form and manner of education most useful for republican citizens. Jefferson both respected and resented Europe's claims of superiority in cultural matters. But as captivated as Jefferson was by European artistic and literary attainments, he was appalled at the misery and squalor that he observed among the masses in France. In letters from Europe to those in America, Jefferson expressed his opinions of European education, and what was necessary for education in the new republic of the United States. In numerous letters and documents, Jefferson elaborated in some detail on the value of a knowledge of the classics, modern languages, mathematics, chemistry, agriculture, botany and other branches of science, as well as the study of history and ethics. Studies such as these Jefferson considered the bare essentials, the core areas of knowledge that should be in the possession of any American who sought enlightenment. His writings warned of the pitfalls of sending young men to Europe for an education. Convinced that enlightened Americans needed to attend consciously and deliberately to the serious work of educating the body politic, Jefferson sought to distance his countrymen from the social and political traditions that he believed contrasted so markedly with the conditions that should emerge and prevail in the new nation that was forming. To Jefferson liberty depended on education, an education that would ensure that the inalienable rights recently proclaimed and fought for would be realized. Theoretically Jefferson's educational scheme was both democratic and meritocratic. (DK)

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"THAT KNOWLEDGE MOST USEFUL TO US:"

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S CONCEPT OF "UTILITY" IN THE EDUCATION OF REPUBLICAN CITIZENS

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"THAT KNOWLEDGE MOST USEFUL TO US:" THOMAS JEFFERSON'S CONCEPT OF UTILITY IN THE EDUCATION OF REPUBLICAN CITIZENS

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While serving as Minister to France in 1785, Thomas Jefferson received a letter from John Banister, Jr., an American seeking his advice regarding "the best seminary for the education of youth in Europe." Jefferson dutifully replied with commentary on the relative merits of Geneva and Rome, which at the time he considered the most desirable European centers of learning. Rather abruptly, Jefferson then diverted his correspondent's attention to a more fundamental question: "But why send an American youth to Europe for education," Jefferson asked? "What are the objects of an useful American education?"[1]

What indeed were to be the "objects" or aims of education for citizens of the new republic? Why should it matter what young Americans studied or whether they were educated at home or abroad? What, to Jefferson's way of thinking, was the relationship between the content and context of "an useful

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[1]Thomas Jefferson to John Banister, Jr., October 15, 1785, in Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, V (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1905), p. 186, emphasis added. Although at this point in time Jefferson thought Rome superior to other seats of learning, a few years later he considered Edinburgh the best in the world. See Thomas Jefferson to Mr. M'Alister, December 22, 1791, in ibid., VIII, pp. 274-275.

education" and the conduct and character of American youth? We shall argue here that Jefferson's responses to these questions are central to an understanding of his evolving concept of the form and manner of education most useful for republican citizens. We will consider as well the charge that Jefferson's emphasis on utility in education has contributed directly to the uncritical and conservative nature of American education.

The rationale Jefferson presented 1785 in reply to his fellow countryman's inquiry provides an important, if somewhat circumscribed, beginning point in our search for Jefferson's depiction of "that knowledge most useful to us." However, it is with that response and the events and influences that shaped that response that our exploration must begin.

The Education of Republican Citizens: Content and Context

Thomas Jefferson both respected and resented Europe's claims of superiority in cultural matters. He had undertaken his mission to France with some concern that he might be perceived as "a savage from the mountains of America." He found himself dazzled and charmed by the gracious manners and refinement of the French elite, among whom, he said, "it seems that a man might pass a life without encountering a single rudeness." He marvelled at the heights that had been achieved in the arts and opened his heart to one correspondent by declaring:

> Were I to tell you how much I enjoy their architecture, sculpture, painting, music, I should want words. It is in

> these arts they shine. The last of them particularly, is an enjoyment the deprivation of which with us, cannot be calculated. I am almost ready to say, it is the only thing which from my heart I envy them, and which, in spite of all the authority of the Decalogue, I do covet.[2]

As captivated as Jefferson was by European artistic and literary attainments, he was appalled at the misery and squalor that he observed among the masses in France. In the same letter in which he confessed envy of the status of the arts in Europe, he observed that "the general fate of humanity here [is] most deplorable." Jefferson asserted that "the great mass of people are suffering under physical and moral oppression" and he contended that even among the aristocracy there was less happiness and domestic tranquility than was enjoyed by the general population of America. Jefferson's experiences in Europe prompted him to give thanks repeatedly for the fact that a great ocean separated the fledgling American republic from the contamination of European conditions and conventions.[3]

In light of Jefferson's ambivalent assessment of European society, it is not surprising that, in his reply to Banister, he was brief not only in his treatment of the question regarding the

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[2]Thomas Jefferson to Charles Bellini, September 30, 1785, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, V, pp. 151-154.

[3]See, for example, Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, August 13, 1786 in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, V, p. 396 and Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, [March 4, 1801], in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Modern Library, 1944), p.323.

best seat of learning in the Old World, but also in his mention of the studies he thought most appropriate for youth in the New World. He recommended a knowledge of the classics and modern languages, especially French, Spanish, and Italian. He also listed mathematics, chemistry, agriculture, botany and other branches of science, as well the study of history and ethics. Studies such as these Jefferson considered the bare essentials, the core areas of knowledge that should be in the possession of any American who sought enlightenment.

In numerous other letters and documents written both before and after his exchange with Banister, Jefferson elaborated in some detail on the value of these and other fields of study, as we shall see. However, in this letter he deemed a mere listing to be sufficient. Jefferson in this instance was intent on engaging an issue that he considered more pressing than that of the textual substance or content of education. The value or usefulness of education, Jefferson reasoned in this letter, is determined by context as well as by content. To Jefferson, the kind of education most valuable for republican citizens was one that could be acquired more surely and more safely in the raw towns and villages of the new American nation than in the ancient and revered capitals of Europe.

Writing from Paris, a metropolitan center of renowned sophistication and refinement, Jefferson invited Banister to consider the disadvantages of sending American youth to Europe. He pointed to only a few of the many snares awaiting, for to

enumerate them all, said Jefferson, "would require a volume." Jefferson reflected first on the questionable pastimes to which a lad would be exposed if sent to England to study. He listed "drinking, horse racing, and boxing" as the chief amusements of the youth of that nation. In that country and elsewhere abroad an American student would likely acquire a "fondness for European luxury and dissipation, and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country," Jefferson warned. Moreover, wrote Jefferson, the youngster quite likely would become fascinated with the grand lifestyle of European aristocrats and look with scorn upon the advance of equality in his native land. In passages that would stir the imagination if not the emotions of youth (and, as one psychohistorian has suggested, that may have reflected Jefferson's own yearnings), he warned also of the lure of the "voluptuary dress and arts of the European women" that would arouse the desire for "female intrigue." Yielding to this, the "strongest of all the human passions," Jefferson said, would lead to infidelity and the ruination of both health and marital happiness.[4]

Jefferson set forth yet another consideration directed even more pointedly to the perils of foreign study. A young man educated in Europe, he cautioned, would form friendships that would be useless and temporary, while at the same time he would

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[4]. Jefferson to Banister, Jr., October 15, 1785, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, V, pp. 186-187. A provocative inquiry into Jefferson's sexual life is provided by Fawn M. Brodie, Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974). For an opposing view, see Virginius Dabney, The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981).

miss out on forming bonds with fellow countrymen that under proper conditions would be of "the most faithful and permanent" kind. Educated as a foreigner in terms of his affections, values, tastes, and even in style and manner of writing and speaking, an American abroad, Jefferson concluded, would become alienated and lost. He would lose, said Jefferson, "in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness."

While Jefferson confessed to Banister that his zeal as an American may have led to a bit of hyperbole in his description of European dissipation and dangers, he nonetheless appealed to Banister's own experience as an American:

> Cast your eye over America: who are the men of most learning, of most eloquence, most beloved by their countrymen and most trusted and promoted by them? They are those who have been educated among them, and whose manners, morals, and habits, are perfectly homogeneous with those of the country.[5]

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[5]Jefferson to Banister, Jr., October 15, 1785, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, V, pp. 185-188. Only two months earlier, Jefferson had written to Walker Maury, who was tutoring Jefferson's nephew, Peter Carr: "Of all the errors which can possibly be committed in the education of youth, that of sending them to Europe is the most fatal." Two years later Jefferson thought it necessary to remind his nephew: "There is no place where your pursuit of knowledge will be so little obstructed by foreign objects, as your own country, nor any, wherein the virtues of the heart will be less exposed to be weakened." Thomas Jefferson to Walker Maury, August 19, 1785, in Julian P. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, VIII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 409-410; Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, VI, p. 262. For variations on this theme, see Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thompson, November 11, 1784 in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, IV (New

In this and many other letters written from France, Jefferson revealed at once a pride in his homeland and a keen sense of the frailty of the embryonic nation. Convinced that enlightened Americans needed to attend consciously and deliberately to the serious work of educating the body politic, Jefferson sought to distance his countrymen from the social and political traditions that he believed contrasted so markedly with the conditions that should emerge and prevail in the new nation that was forming. Jefferson's letter to Banister was thus an appeal to a rising American consciousness. It also highlighted an important facet of his concept of utility in education: republican citizens must themselves be educated in the new republic.

Toward the More General Diffusion of Knowledge

Jefferson had not long been in the public arena before he turned his attention to the pressing question of the relationship between education and liberty. Dumas Malone, the premier biographer of Jefferson, contended that throughout Jefferson's life, "liberty was his chief concern, and his major emphasis was on the freedom of the spirit and the mind." Merrill Peterson has more recently commented that "Jefferson's faith in freedom and self-government was at bottom a faith in education, which therefore became a paramount responsibility of

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York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899), p. 14-15; Thomas Jefferson to Ralph Izard, July 17, 1788, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, VII, pp. 70-73.

the state." Jefferson himself set forth in unmistakable terms the essential linkage between liberty and education in a letter to George Washington in 1786:

> It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that too, of the people with a certain degree of instruction. This it is the business of the state to effect, and on a general plan.[6]

To Jefferson then, liberty depended on education, an education that would ensure that the inalienable rights recently proclaimed and fought for in the Revolution would in fact be realized by his and future generations. The need, quite simply, was for an education that would be useful for republican citizens. This conviction led Jefferson, a member of a special legislative committee that had been formed in late 1776 to revise Virginia's laws, to draft Bill 79, a Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. This bill, composed in 1778, and two companion proposals, one recommending changes in the constitution of the College of William and Mary and another providing for the establishment of a public library in Richmond,

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[6]Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, p. xiv; Merrill D. Peterson, ed., The Portable Thomas Jefferson (New York:Penguin Books, 1975), p. xxi; Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, January 4, 1785 [i.e., 1786] in Boyd, ed., The Papers, IX, pp. 150-152.

were presented to the legislature on June 18, 1779.[7]

Jefferson had high hopes for his education proposal. Before the bill's fate had been decided, Jefferson wrote to his friend and colleague, George Wythe, that "the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness."[8]

Had Jefferson's education bill been adopted, it would have provided for publicly supported elementary and secondary schools and access to the College of William and Mary for a limited number of the best and brightest young men "raked from the rubbish annually." Malone suggested that had the bill been successful, Jefferson would have probably listed it along with his statute for religious freedom as among his greatest achievements. Jefferson was denied that possibility, however. When finally brought to a vote in late 1786, Bill 79 was defeated, the cost of the measure being cited as the main

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[7]George Wythe was Jefferson's primary co-laborer in this undertaking, although the original committee consisted of five members. Also named to the Committee of Revisors were George Mason, who asked to be excused from the arduous task, Thomas Ludwell Lee, who died soon after the committee began its work, and Edmund Pendleton. Pendleton remained a member of the committee, but his contributions were not significant. The final report, submitted two and a half years after the revision was initiated, contained 126 bills. Among the most important bills that clearly bear Jefferson's stamp were the ones dealing with citizenship, crime and punishment, religion, and education. See Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, pp. 261ff; Thomas Jefferson to Skelton Jones, July 28, 1809, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XII, pp. 297-303.

[8]Jefferson to Wythe, August 13, 1786, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, V, p. 396.

detriment. Jefferson's disappointment can be gauged in part by an appeal he had made to Wythe a few months earlier:

> Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know . . . that the tax which will be paid . . . is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests, and nobles, who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.[9]

Jefferson, who in his own words was "not a friend to a very energetic government," considered popular education as a preferable alternative to a strong government. While governmental power should be limited, in one sphere its activity was, he thought, quite legitimate. Providing for the education of the people, he wrote to James Madison in the winter of 1787, was "the most legitimate engine of government." Echoing a familiar refrain, Jefferson reminded Madison that an educated populace would see the advantage of preserving peace and order and would be, in fact, "the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."[10]

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[9]Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, June 18, 1779, in Roy J. Honeywell, The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), pp. 199-205; Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia [1787], William Peden, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), p. 146; Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, p. 280; Jefferson to Wythe, August 13, 1786, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, V, p. 394-398.

[10]Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, December 20, 1787, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, pp. 436-441.

We need not detain ourselves here with numerous points of detail concerning Jefferson's bill. What does invite our attention, however, are questions of utility: what was the practical aim of Jefferson's plan? In what way did the system he outlined and the studies he proposed promise to enhance republican citizenship? In exploring the contours of Jefferson's mind regarding these matters, we move into a deeper understanding of the mode and content of education that he thought not only useful, but essential in a republican society.

The Aims of Education for the General Population

In the preamble to the 1779 education bill, Jefferson addressed squarely the overarching purpose of his proposed legislation. Noting that even under the best forms of government those entrusted with power are tempted to pervert it into tyranny, Jefferson asserted that the most effective means of preventing this would be "to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large." This he proposed to do through the creation and public support of a statewide system of elementary schools to which all free children, male and female, would be granted admission without charge.

The curriculum Jefferson outlined for pupils at this level appears at first glance to be rather conventional: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Jefferson proposed, however, that the books used to teach reading "shall be such as will at the same

time make them acquainted with Grecian, Roman, English, and American history." History was to play a special role in the basic education of republican citizens. It would be through the study of history, Jefferson maintained, that the young would gain knowledge of events in other ages and other countries and, so informed, would be able to recognize or "know ambition in all its shapes" and thus be motivated to "exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes." In a society in which the governed were to be the guardians of their own liberties, no other study could be of comparable importance. The value or utility of history, as Jefferson conceived it, makes more understandable his assertion decades later that there is "no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves," and his corollary that, "if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."[11]

However limited Jefferson's proposed elementary curriculum might appear to those of a later age, his objectives for

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[11]Jefferson, Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, in Honeywell, p. 199; Thomas Jefferson to William C. Jarvis, September 28, 1820, in Ford, ed., The Writings, X, p. 160-161. Over time, Jefferson's specific curricular recommendations varied in some details. In a letter written over thirty years after he drafted his initial proposal, for example, Jefferson recommended geography as an elementary level subject and moved history (to be taught in conjunction with the ancient and modern languages) into the secondary and tertiary tiers. See Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, September 7, 1814, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, pp. 642-649.

education at this level suggest a degree of usefulness and range of competencies that would challenge the best efforts of teachers of any era. Years later, in drafting "The Rockfish Gap Report" that led to the establishment of the University of Virginia, Jefferson enumerated the aims of education appropriate for republican citizens. His listing of the objectives of primary or elementary education in that document merits quotation in full:

> To give every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business;
>
> To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts, in writing;
>
> To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties;
>
> To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either;
>
> To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment;
>
> And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed.[12]

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[12][Thomas Jefferson], "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia, &c.," August 4, 1818, in Honeywell, pp. 249-250. Again making slight

If the mass of the population were so instructed, Jefferson reasoned, the odds of the continued survival of the society would be greatly increased. Jefferson was equally certain that, without the widespread diffusion of knowledge, the future of the republican experiment was in doubt: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization," he wrote, "it expects what never was and never will be."[13]

Education and Morality

It is significant to note that Jefferson made no mention of the "fourth R," religion, in his 1779 proposal. His own upbringing and schooling certainly had included inculcation in the general precepts of Anglicanism, and, for all his anticlericalism and skepticism on many points of Christian doctrine in later life, he considered religion as "too important" and "the consequences of error . . . too serious" for that realm to be ignored.[14]

There were others during the Revolutionary era and beyond who, like Jefferson, expressed great concern regarding the moral fiber and religious convictions of citizens in the new republic.

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adjustments in the ordering of elementary subjects, in addition to "reading, writing and numerical arithmetic," Jefferson specified "the elements of mensuration" [basic geometry] and "the outlines of geography and history."

[13]Thomas Jefferson to Colonel Charles Yancey, January 6, 1816, in Ford, The Writings, X, p. 1-4.

[14]Jefferson to Carr, August 10, 1787, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, VI, p. 258.

Benjamin Rush, for example, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and probably the best-known American physician of his day, argued that "the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in RELIGION." Rush reasoned that without religion, "there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments." Believing then that the safety, happiness and well-being of civil government necessitated that American children be indoctrinated in the doctrines and disciplines of their families' Christian faith, Rush in effect equated Christianity with republicanism:

> A Christian . . . cannot fail of being a republican, for every precept of the Gospel inculcates those degrees of humility, self-denial, and brotherly kindness which are directly opposed to the pride of monarchy and the pageantry of a court. A Christian cannot fail of being useful to the republic, for his religion teacheth him that no man "liveth to himself." And lastly, a Christian cannot fail of being wholly inoffensive, for his religion teacheth him in all things to do to others what he would wish, in like circumstances, they should do to him.[15]

If the irony of Rush's invocation of the Golden Rule and

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[15]Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," [Philadelphia, 1786], in Frederick Rudolph, ed., Essays on Education in the Early Republic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 10-12.

his admonition that Christianity should be the preferred if not the established religion of the Republic escaped him, Jefferson was more attuned to the tension. No less than Rush, Jefferson also valued the moral teachings of Christianity in terms of their effect on public virtue and individual happiness. He also perceived an intimate connection between religion and morality. However, Jefferson maintained that morality, while rooted in religion, was independent of the dogmatic teachings of specific religious sects. "On the dogmas of religion, as distinguished from moral principles," Jefferson said, "all mankind, from the beginning of the world to this day, have been quarreling, fighting, burning, and torturing one another, for abstractions unintelligible to themselves and to all others, and absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind." The points on which religious groups divide, Jefferson concluded, had little or nothing to do with moral action. Having no doubt that the practice of morality was necessary for the well-being of society, Jefferson also believed that "the interests of society require the observation of those moral precepts only in which all religions agree (for all forbid us to murder, steal, plunder, or bear false witness). . . ."[16]

Although Jefferson mentioned morality as an explicit aim of elementary education, he implicitly consigned specific religious

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[16]Thomas Jefferson to Matthew Carey, November 11, 1816, in Ford, ed., The Writings, X, pp. 67-68; Thomas Jefferson to James Fishback, September 27, 1809, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XII, p. 314-316.

instruction to the private sphere of family and church. Moreover, Jefferson deemed religion a complex and highly rational affair, a matter that required intensive study and contemplation. This was beyond the reach of young children. Peter Carr, Jefferson's nephew, was seventeen years of age when Jefferson advised him that he was then mature enough to "fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion" regarding the existence of God and other religious teachings.[17]

Jefferson's advice to his nephew certainly did not mean that moral or ethical teachings should wait until one's reasoning powers were fully developed. Jefferson, who believed that "true religion is morality," also believed that the Creator had implanted in human beings a common or shared "moral sense." He referred to this moral instinct as "the brightest gem with which the human character is studded." This conscience or sense of right and wrong, said Jefferson, "is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a stronger or weaker degree." Thus, like bodily muscles, the moral faculty might be strengthened by exercise. To Jefferson, it was therefore not so much the content of the moral law that

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[17]Jefferson to Carr, August 10, 1787, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, VI, pp. 258-261. Jefferson's views on the role of religion in education has been explored in Robert M. Healey, Jefferson on Religion in Public Education (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). See also Charles B. Sanford, The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984.

needed attention, but rather the process of making moral decisions.[18]

In the Jeffersonian approach to moral development, the task of the school, along with the family, was to use every opportunity to help the young develop virtuous habits. In part this would be done by encouraging young people to reflect on the consequences of decisions made in everyday life and to heed the promptings of conscience. Judicious reading could also aid in the moral reasoning process. Although generally contemptuous of novels as being a "mass of trash" and a waste of time, Jefferson nonetheless contended that carefully selected works of fiction could be of some value in terms of teaching values. Authors who modeled their narratives on the incidents of real life were sometimes able, he suggested, to provide "interesting and useful vehicles of a sound morality." Books that described situations closely similar to those of life in which the characters confronted moral choices had a special utility. Jefferson maintained that "everything is useful which contributes to fix in us the principles and practice of virtue." Reading of acts

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[18]Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, May 5, 1817, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XV, p. 427; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, Esq., June 13, 1814, in ibid., XIV, pp. 139-141; Jefferson to Carr, August 10, 1787, in ibid., VI, p. 257; Healey, pp. 159-160. See also Garry Wills, Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), pp. 181-206. In his letter to Carr, Jefferson gave classic form to the idea of the equality of the moral sense by asserting: "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules" (p. 257-258).

of charity may stimulate "a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts, also." By the same token, Jefferson contended, "when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice." These vicarious lessons, Jefferson believed, could stimulate and exercise moral feelings and thereby strengthen the habit of thinking and acting virtuously.[19]

If fiction could be instructive in strengthening morality, factual knowledge held even greater potency. Jefferson's conviction that history offered lessons that could serve to prevent the reappearance of tyranny was tied to his belief that the study of the past presented limitless opportunities for calling the moral sense into play. He observed in his Notes on the State of Virginia:

> Instead therefore of putting the Bible and Testament into the hands of the children, at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious enquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history. The first elements of morality too may be instilled into their minds; such as, when further developed as their judgments advance in strength, may teach them how to work out their own

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[19]Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Burwell, Esq., March 14, 1818, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, p. 688; Thomas Jefferson to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771, In Boyd, ed., The Papers, I, pp. 76-77.

> greatest happiness, by shewing [sic] them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.[20]

For Jefferson, then, the utility or value of moral development was that it contributed directly to the happiness and well-being of the republican citizen and to the harmony of the republican state. The useful citizen was the moral citizen, respected and admired by his countrymen. "Above all things," Jefferson advised his nephew, "lose no occasion of exercising your dispositions to be grateful, to be generous, to be charitable, to be humane, to be true, just, firm, orderly, courageous, &c. Consider every act of this kind, as an exercise which will strengthen your moral faculties and increase your worth."[21]

The Utility of Female Education

While Jefferson's plan of 1779 provided for the education of girls through the elementary grades, he did not envision

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[20] Jefferson, Notes, p. 147.

[21] Jefferson to Carr, August 10, 1787, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, VI, p. 258, emphasis added. In an earlier letter to Carr, Jefferson had warned that loss of honor and integrity "can never be made up by all the other acquirements of body and mind." Morality, then, should be the first object of education. "Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act." Jefferson to Carr, August 19, 1785, in ibid., V, p. 83.

public support for the education of women beyond that point. He did, however, favor the continuing education of women and was clearly utilitarian in his motives. Reflecting the accepted definition of the "woman's sphere" in the early American social order, Jefferson reasoned that, as future mothers and wives, young women needed instruction in household economy as well as in other realms. In properly ordered households, most of the guidance and instruction of girls naturally would rest with the mother.

Jefferson, who after ten years of marriage became a widower left with the responsibility of three young daughters, was acutely aware of the fact that one could not assume the existence of a "typical" family or take for granted that young girls would consider domestic skills to be of great importance. He nonetheless thought it imperative that girls be given the instruction they would need in order to become good wives, mothers, and, if necessary, even paternal surrogates. Advice on these matters he frequently gave his daughters, while much of their actual instruction and care, especially during his years abroad, was of necessity provided by relatives.[22]

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[22]Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson died on September 6, 1782, after ten years of marriage to Thomas Jefferson. The youngest Jefferson daughter, Lucy Elizabeth, was only a few months old when her mother died. Lucy Elizabeth (the second Jefferson daughter so named) died at the age of two; two other infant sisters and an unnamed brother had preceded her in death. The two daughters who lived to adulthood, Mary and Martha, were four and ten when their mother died. The girls passed much of their youth in the care of their aunt and uncle, Elizabeth and Francis Eppes.

Jefferson accounted "the order and economy of a house [as being] as honorable to the mistress as those of the farm to the master." He was persistent in urging his surviving daughters, Martha and Mary, to practice their domestic skills. "Tell me," he wrote to his daughter Mary in a rather typical letter, "how many hours a day [do] you sew? . . . [Do] you know how to make a pudding yet, to cut out a beefsteak, to sow spinach? or to set a hen?" In a letter to Martha, he wrote of needlework as a valuable skill and a useful activity that could help her pass the time when forced to endure dull weather or dull company. He added that a plantation mistress could not direct the work of her servants if she lacked the skills herself. Domestic proficiency, Jefferson insisted, was of absolute necessity if a woman were to perform her duties as a responsible wife and mother.[23]

There were other responsibilities and duties women faced that required education of a more formal sort. Jefferson thought it essential that his own daughters be given a "solid education," one which would enable them to educate their daughters and even to direct the course of their sons' education, "should their fathers be lost, or incapable, or inattentive." Jefferson gave serious thought to the possibility

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[23]Jefferson to Burwell, March 14, 1818, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, pp. 687-689; Thomas Jefferson to Maria [Mary] Jefferson, April 11, 1790, in Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr., The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), p. 52; Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson, March 28, 1787, in ibid., p. 35.

that his daughters' husbands might not be able or willing to carry out their responsibilities toward their children. In a letter encouraging Martha in her studies, Jefferson calculated that the odds were one in fourteen that she might marry a "blockhead" and thus have to survive by her own wits! It was obvious to Jefferson that women as well as men needed a useful education.[24]

Although Jefferson once stated that "a plan of female education has never been a subject of systematic contemplation with me," he in fact did give the matter considerable thought, as his letters to his daughters, granddaughters, and to others testify. Jefferson had definite ideas regarding the education of women in a republican society, at least for those whose circumstances might enable them to continue in self-improvement beyond the level of elementary schooling that he hoped would be made available to the entire citizenry.

Jefferson encouraged his own daughters and granddaughters to gain proficiency in French, Spanish, and Latin as well as in English, and directed their reading in history and carefully selected works of literature. He coaxed them with assurances that the more they progressed in their studies, the more worthy of his love they would become. Jefferson was unrelenting in his prodding and planning in their behalf. "I am anxious to know what books you read, what tunes you can play, and to receive

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[24]Jefferson to Burwell, March 14, 1818, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, pp. 687-689.

specimens of your drawing," he wrote to Martha. She was eleven years old when her father laid out a plan of studies that detailed how she might most profitably spend each hour of the day: music practice from 8 to 10; dancing or drawing (on alternating days) followed by letter writing from 10 to 2; French from 3 to 4; music again from 4 to 5; and from 5 until bedtime, "read English, write, &c." He admonished her to take care to never spell a word wrong in her correspondence, for a lady who always spells correctly will earn "great praise." She should attend meticulously to her appearance, giving care to dress herself in such a manner that "you may be seen by any gentleman without his being able to discover a pin amiss, or any other circumstance of neatness wanting." These and countless similar admonitions that filled Jefferson's letters to his daughters and grandchildren convincingly demonstrate that Jefferson's expectations were demanding and often quite detailed. Admitting this in a letter to Martha, he added that his expectations were "not higher than you may attain. Industry and resolution are all that is wanting."[25]

Jefferson's most explicit directives on the education of women were presented in a letter to Nathaniel Burwell in 1818. As noted earlier, Jefferson urged caution regarding fiction,

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[25]Jefferson to Burwell, March 14, 1818, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, p.687; Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson, January 15, 1784, in Betts and Bear, Family Letters, p. 23; Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson, November 28, 1783, in ibid., p. 20; Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson, December 22, 1783, in ibid., p. 22; Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson, March 28, 1787, in ibid., p. 35.

except for novels known to have redeeming moral qualities. Poetry he thought of little value for women, although he did concede that some works by Pope, Dryden, Shakespeare, or Moliere, among others, might be useful in terms of forming style and taste and therefore might be read "with pleasure and improvement." Jefferson informed Burwell that French was "an indispensable part of education for both sexes." He recommended dancing lessons as a desirable "ornament," as a source of healthy exercise, and as a necessary accomplishment for young women who would be expected to participate "without awkwardness" in the circles of festivity. Jefferson entered a caveat regarding dancing, however. The value of dancing was of short duration, he said, noting that he subscribed to the French "rule" that "no lady dances after marriage." More than mere decorum lent support to this custom, for as Jefferson explained to Martha, the prohibition "is founded in solid physical reasons, gestation and nursing leaving little time to a married lady when this exercise can be either safe or innocent."

Jefferson thought drawing of some value in the education of girls: "an innocent and engaging amusement, often useful, and a qualification not to be neglected in one who is to become a mother and an instructor." He suggested that music was invaluable in furnishing escape from the cares of the day and was a source of enjoyment that would last throughout life. Ever practical, however, Jefferson bluntly offered his opinion that

if a child does not have an ear for music, no attempt should be made to provide instruction.[26]

With the exception of the stress laid on domestic skills, Jefferson's advice regarding the education of girls is remarkably similar in kind, if not degree, to the education recommended for boys. Certainly the general themes are the same: an emphasis on morality, health, and practical knowledge that would enable one to become self-reliant and serviceable to others. Jefferson easily could have been writing to a nephew or grandson, rather than to his daughter, when he admonished:

> The object most interesting to me for the residue of my life, will be to see you developing daily those principles of virtue and goodness which will make you valuable to others and happy in yourselves, and acquiring those talents and that degree of science [knowledge] which will guard you at all times against ennui, the most dangerous poison of life. A mind employed is always happy. This is the true secret, the grand recipe for felicity.[27]

For the daughters as well as the sons of republican citizens, then, education should equip one for the pursuit of happiness in the broadest sense. Happiness was to be found in virtue, in useful service, and in an active mind. It was on

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[26]Jefferson to Burwell, March 14, 1818, in Koch and Peden, eds., Life and Selected Writings, pp. 688-689.

[27]Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson, May 21, 1787, in Betts and Bear, Family Letters, p. 41.

this foundation that the structure of the "good life" and the scaffolding of the new nation should be built.[28]

Educating "the Most Precious Gift of Nature:" Republican Leadership

The Laboring and the Learned Classes

The general object of Jefferson's educational scheme was to provide instruction "adapted to the years, to the capacity, and the condition of every one, and directed to their freedom and happiness." In 1814 he wrote to a mature Peter Carr that every citizen needed "an education proportioned to the condition and pursuits of his life." For the average citizen who in Jeffersonian terminology belonged to the "laboring" class, a basic level of elementary education as outlined in his 1779 "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" would

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[28]This discussion of education for republican citizenship has made no mention of Jefferson's ideas concerning the education of non-citizens: Native and African Americans, slave or free. He did advocate a scheme for the education of slaves as part of a plan for the gradual emancipation and deportation of the African American population and at various times expressed views concerning the education and assimilation of the Native American population. These concerns, while vital in terms of a complete understanding of Jefferson's educational and social philosophy, are beyond the scope of this essay. See, in addition to Jefferson's comments on the differences among the races and his deep misgivings over slavery as expressed in his Notes, the assessment of John Chester Miller, The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991). A brief commentary may be found in Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., "Jefferson, Justice, and the Enlightened Society," in Spheres of Justice in Education, Deborah A. Verstegen and James Gordon Wood, eds. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 20-23.

suffice. For those citizens who gave evidence of belonging to "the learned" class, however, elementary education was to serve as a foundation for further study. Those boys "whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue" required more advanced preparation in order to qualify them for their varied pursuits and duties in a republican society.[29]

Jefferson's 1779 bill (and a later version written in 1817) called for public support of poor but talented boys who could survive the periodic screenings that would thin the ranks of the scholarship students (or "public foundationers," as Jefferson called them) in the grammar or secondary schools. A select few of these, "chosen for the superiority of their parts and disposition," would then pursue, at public expense, the most advanced education then available by matriculating at the College of William and Mary. Other students, less talented but whose parents or guardians were able to pay tuition fees, could, as always, continue with their schooling as long as they wished.[30]

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[29]Jefferson, Notes, p. 147; Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, September 7, 1814, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XIX, p. 213; Jefferson, Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, in Honeywell, p. 199.

[30]The precise structural details of Jefferson's educational plans are not of immediate concern in this essay. See, among others, Honeywell, supra; Charles F. Arrowood, Thomas Jefferson and Education in a Republic (New York: McGraw Hill, 1930); Gordon C. Lee, ed., Crusade Against Ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, [1961], 1967; James B. Conant, Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962); Joseph F. Kett, "Education," in Merrill D. Peterson, Thomas Jefferson: A

Jefferson had laid out the basic rationale for and utilitarian orientation of his differentiated system of education in his initial education bill. In that proposal he stated that people are happiest "whose laws are best, and are best administered." The wise formation and proper administration of the laws in turn depended upon wise and honest public servants. Jefferson therefore contended that "it becomes expedient for promoting public happiness" that the best and brightest students should be prepared by education to "guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens." Leadership should be determined by merit "without regard to wealth, birth, or other accidental condition or circumstance." Since the parents of many children "whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments for the public" could not afford to educate their offspring, Jefferson concluded that "it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expense of all, than that the happiness of all should be confined to the weak or wicked."[31]

Theoretically, at least, Jefferson's educational scheme would seem to have been both democratic and meritocratic.

Reference Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), pp. 233-251; and Harold Hellenbrand, The Unfinished Revolution: Education and Politics in the Thought of Thomas Jefferson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

[31]Jefferson, Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, in Honeywell, pp. 199-200. Cf. Jefferson's 1817 bill and his detailed letter of September 7, 1814 to Peter Carr, both available in Honeywell, pp. 233-243 and pp. 222-227.

Equality of opportunity for all at the foundation of the system was to be converted into the advancement of the talented few as the most able students progressed toward the top of the educational pyramid. However, it has been argued with some justification that Jefferson's vision was obstructed by the fact that he failed to take into account the ability of the wealthy to maintain their edge by providing any and all of their children with the advantages of education, regardless of their ability. Merle Curti pointed out, for example, that the landed gentry "could enrich the lives of even the more mediocre of their children" and could, through their ability to pay tuition, enable them to advance far beyond the average child of the poor who would be permitted only three years of elementary education at public expense.[32]

That Jefferson was unable to resolve a feature of American social life that persists to this day ought not be allowed to diminish an appreciation for the boldness of his proposal in the context of eighteenth century Virginia. His plan, which might be said to represent a modest compromise between private and public education, was a radical departure from the conventions of the day. Moreover, his belief that citizens of superior talents ought to serve in positions of leadership was not at all antithetical to his belief that "every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone." Convinced that

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[32]Merle Curti, The Social Ideas of American Educators (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co., [1935], 1974), p. 42.

the people had to be the ultimate guardians of their own liberty, he not only held it imperative that the children of all citizens should receive a basic education in the rights and duties of citizenship, but he insisted that those who would become the representatives of the people should be properly prepared for their solemn responsibility. The part of his plan that provided for the identification and support of the most talented youth from among the laboring population was clearly designed "to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich." These citizens of demonstrated ability were to make themselves available for public office, not as rulers, but as servants; they were to become "useful instruments for the public."[33]

In an exchange of letters with John Adams late in life as the two former political foes were trying to bridge the years and ideological gulf that had separated them, Jefferson commented on several bills he had prepared for the Virginia legislature in the late 1770s in his effort to lay "the axe to the root of pseudo-aristocracy." He specifically mentioned his education bill and asserted that, had his proposal been adopted, "worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts." Jefferson confided to Adams:

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[33]Jefferson, Notes, p. 148; Jefferson, "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," in Honeywell, p. 200.

> For I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents. . . . The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, trusts, and government of society. . . . May we not even say, that that form of government is best, which provides the most effectively for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?

Jefferson added: "The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provisions should be made to prevent its ascendancy." This could be done, Jefferson suggested to Adams, by free elections in which an educated populace could separate the natural from the artificial aristocracy, as wheat could be separated from chaff. Clearly, as Jefferson wrote to Adams, in the republican society for which both men had long labored, education had to become "the keystone of the arch of our government."[34]

Educating the Natural Aristocracy

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[34]Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., The Complete Adams-Jefferson Letters (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1959], 1987, pp. 387-392, at p. 388-390, emphasis added.

In any assessment of Jefferson's education prescriptions, one must keep in mind Merrill Peterson's observation that Jefferson's ideas "were in constant motion and seldom abstracted from immediately practical objectives." This caution applies with special force when considering the ordering of studies in Jefferson's various writings on secondary and higher education. His views as expressed in legislative proposals and private correspondence reflected the constraints and opportunities of the moment as well as the maturing of his thought over time. Thus, for example, his ideas in the late 1770s regarding curricular reforms at William and Mary, or his advice to Peter Carr in 1814 regarding the transformation of the lifeless Albemarle Academy into Central College, or his later recommendations regarding the offerings of the University of Virginia were not altogether consistent in detail. There was, however, a very definite consistency in purpose and function. As he repeatedly stressed in correspondence, the institution envisioned as the apex of his educational system should be so constituted that "every branch of science, useful at this day, may be taught in its highest degree." However the various subjects were ordered or categorized in this or that proposal, always the focus was on useful knowledge of the highest level.[35]

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[35]Merrill D. Peterson, Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 971. See, for example, Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814, in Cappon, ed., Adams-Jefferson Letters, pp. 430-434, at p. 434; Jefferson to Carr, September 7, 1814, in Lipscomb and Bergh, The Writings, XIX, pp. 211-221, at 211, emphasis added.

In 1800, long before Jefferson was able to give sustained attention to the academical and architectural design of the University of Virginia, he had written to Joseph Priestley of his ambitions for his state:

> We wish to establish in the upper country, and more centrally for the State, an University on a plan so broad and liberal and modern, as to be worth patronizing with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other States to come and drink of the cup of knowledge and fraternize with us.

Jefferson observed that the courses of study in this modern university should be judiciously selected, for "in an institution meant chiefly for use, some branches of science, formerly esteemed, may now be omitted."[36]

Jefferson ventured a hasty listing of useful courses in his letter to Priestley, and fourteen years later, in writing to Carr, provided a much more thoughtful and detailed sketch of studies he thought appropriate for each tier in a complete system of education. A listing of university-level courses appeared as well in Jefferson's 1817 attempt to have the state of Virginia establish a comprehensive system of public schools. However, it was in Jefferson's 1818 curricular design for the University of Virginia that he laid out in sharpest relief the programs of study and statements of purpose that should define

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[36]Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Priestley, January 18, 1800 in Honeywell, p. 215, emphasis in original.

the nature of the higher learning. It is to that document, "The Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia, &c."--more generally referred to as "The Rockfish Gap Report"--that we now turn our attention.[37]

The Uses of the Higher Learning

Consistent with his lifelong rejection of the notion that his or any generation should "tread with awful reverence in the footsteps of our fathers," Jefferson declared in the Rockfish Gap Report his belief in progress and his conviction that education was the key to progress. "Education," he wrote, "engrafts a new man of the native stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth." He noted further:

> And it cannot be but that each generation succeeding to the knowledge acquired by all those who preceded it, adding to it their own acquisitions and discoveries, and handing the mass down for successive and constant accumulation, must advance the knowledge and well-being of mankind, not infinitely, as some

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[37]Ibid., pp. 215-216; Jefferson to Carr, September 7, 1814, in ibid., pp. 222-227; [Thomas Jefferson], A Bill for Establishing A System of Public Education [October 24, 1817], in ibid., pp. 233-243; [Jefferson], "Report of the Commissioners," [August 4, 1818], in ibid., pp. 248-260.

have said, but indefinitely, and to a term which no one can fix and forsee.[38]

Indefinite progress, however appealing as a concept, was much too abstract to stand undefined as the ultimate purpose of advanced education. Jefferson had in view a university that would contribute directly to the betterment of mankind in clearly defined ways, a university in which each set of offerings would be immediately tied to the needs of the society. He made explicit his vision of the ends the new university should serve by stating that its purposes were:

> To form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend;
>
> To expound the principles and structure of government, the laws which regulate the intercourse of nations, those formed municipally for our own government, and a sound spirit of legislation, which, banishing all arbitrary and unnecessary restraint on individual action, shall leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another;
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> To harmonize and promote the interests of agriculture, manufactures and commerce, and by well informed views of political economy to give a free scope to the public industry;

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[38][Jefferson], "Report of the Commissioners," August 4, 1818, in Honeywell, p. 251, emphasis in original.

> To develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order;
>
> To enlighten them with mathematical and physical sciences, which advance the arts, and administer the health, subsistence, and comforts of human life;
>
> And, generally, to form them to habits of reflections and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.[39]

Jefferson's listing of the objectives for the University of Virginia made necessary a wide range of advanced studies in the arts, the sciences, and the professions. When setting forth his proposed curriculum, Jefferson grouped what he then considered to be the most useful branches of knowledge into ten categories, each with various subspecialities. Departing significantly from the conventional collegiate practice of holding all students to a common curriculum rooted in the classics, Jefferson proposed that each student be permitted to elect the lectures or courses of study of most interest to him. Provision was made for the ancient languages, but Jefferson's expectation was that students who entered the University would come having already acquired a solid foundation in classical language and culture. At the University, "their classical learning might be critically completed, by a study of the authors of highest degree," said

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[39]Ibid., p. 250.

Jefferson. If unable to attain this level, he added, they should not be admitted to the University.[40]

Jefferson's advocacy of modern languages emphasizes in bold relief the utilitarian orientation of his curriculum. Jefferson contended that French was "the language of general intercourse among nations" and declared that "as a depository of human science, [it] is unsurpassed by any other language, living or dead." Spanish was important, said Jefferson, because it was the language spoken by a large portion of the inhabitants of the New World and much of early American history could be obtained only in that language. Italian literature abounded with valuable works, he explained, much of which provided excellent

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[40]Jefferson's proposed curriculum included: Ancient Languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew); Modern Languages (French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Anglo-Saxon); Pure Mathematics (algebra, fluxions [calculus], geometry, and military and naval architecture); Physico-Mathematics (mechanics, statics, dynamics, pneumatics, acoustics, optics, astronomy, and geography); Natural Philosophy (physics, chemistry, and mineralogy); Natural History (botany and zoology); Anatomy and Medicine; Government (political economy, the law of nature and nations, and history interwoven with politics and law); Law; and Ideology (the science of thought, embracing grammar, ethics, rhetoric, belles lettres, and the fine arts). See [Jefferson], "Report of the Commissioners," in Honeywell, pp. 252-253.

Jefferson expected candidates for diplomas in any of the schools of the University to be able to read the highest Latin classics with ease. His hopes for high scholarship were such that no provision was made for the Bachelor of Arts degree; diplomas were to be of two grades, doctor and graduate. Jefferson met with disappointment in terms of the actual level of proficiency, ability, and deportment of some of the early students, however. See, for example, Philip A. Bruce, History of the University of Virginia, 1819-1919, II (New York: Macmillan, 1920); Dumas Malone, The Sage of Monticello, pp. 418-425; Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., "Honor and Dishonor at Mr. Jefferson's University: The Antebellum Years," History of Education Quarterly, XVI (Summer, 1986), pp. 155-179.

"models of the finest taste in style and composition." And, if at the moment France had the lead in some areas of scholarship, Germany "now stands in a line with the most learned nations in richness of erudition and advance of the sciences." That language, too, was immense value.

The uniqueness of the Jeffersonian curriculum was especially evident in his insistence that Anglo-Saxon was a "modern language" worthy of study. Understanding the evolution of the English language would offer insight, Jefferson maintained, not only into the derivation of words and their usage, but also would provide a deeper understanding of ancient common law on which the American system was based. Our native language, Jefferson asserted, "already fraught with all the eminent science of our parent country, the future vehicle of whatever we may ourselves achieve, and destined to occupy so much space on the globe, claims distinguished attention in American education."[41]

Jefferson's ambitions for medical study at the University of Virginia were much more modest than his claims for other realms of useful knowledge. Considering medicine as occupying the shadowy realm between science and charlatanism--and lacking prospects for the establishment of a hospital in Charlottesville

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[41][Jefferson], "Report of the Commissioners," in Honeywell, p. 254-255. See also Thomas Jefferson, "An Essay Towards Facilitating Instruction in the Anglo-Saxon and Modern Dialects of the English Language for the Use of the University of Virginia," pamphlet enclosed in letter to Herbert Croft, Esq, LL.B., October 30th, 1798, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XVIII, pp. 361-411.

which would be necessary for clinical study and surgical practice--Jefferson commended the historical and theoretical study of the field as an aspect of general culture. Studies in the history of medicine, anatomy, and pharmacology--the latter an applied aspect of courses in botany, mineralogy and chemistry--would at least, he reasoned, enable students to gain a better understanding of the extent and limits of medicine's contributions to human life and health.[42]

If Jefferson considered medicine as a sort of charlatanism of the body, he was clearly even more suspicious of theology and its theorists, the charlatans of the mind. In keeping with his dedication to the principle of maintaining a wall of separation between church and state, Jefferson insisted that there should not be a professor of divinity at the state university. However, he did take care to emphasize that the historical, moral, and literary aspects of religion would be taught as a component of the study of ancient languages and in lectures on ethics. As he had noted on other occasions and in other contexts, Jefferson maintained that in the teaching of ethics, the emphasis should be placed on those moral obligations on which all sects agree. His stance assumed the emergence over time of a common--and thereby useful--faith uniting Americans in a general religion that would reflect the reason of the "author of all the relations of morality." Giving credence to the

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[42]Ibid., p. 255; Peterson, Jefferson and the New Nation, p. 973.

endless sectarian divisions and doctrinal disputes that had subverted the essence of Christianity, however, he considered as anything but useful.[43]

Jefferson's belief in a common religion was not shared by religious sectarians of his day and fears of a "godless university" gained currency early on. By 1822 Jefferson concluded that, without compromising his or the Constitution's principles, a way might be found to provide his religious critics with some reassurance. He reported that there had been no intention of making the University in fact or in appearance indifferent to religion. To the contrary, Jefferson contended, "the relations which exist between man and his Maker, and the duties resulting from those relations, are the most interesting and important to every human being," and should indeed be the object of the most serious study and investigation. Jefferson then proposed that the various sectarian bodies establish seminaries or divinity schools "on the confines" of the University. Jefferson astutely pointed out that the existence of these schools, while independent of the University and of each other, would make it possible for University students to participate in religious exercises with seminarians of their faith. No doubt of greater importance to Jefferson, however, was his contention that students in the divinity schools could have access to the scientific lectures of the University. This,

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[43]Ibid., p. 256; Peterson, Jefferson and the New Nation, p. 973-974.

he hoped, would have the effect of elevating the level of religious discourse to a higher, more scholarly plane. Moreover, by bringing the sectarian religionists together and mixing them with the mass of other students, the University community could "soften their asperities, liberalize and neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality."[44]

The political nature of Jefferson's proposal is obvious, and his strategy proved effective. Jefferson's point-man in the state legislature, Senator Joseph Cabell, informed him that the seminary proposition was warmly received by that body. That no seminaries were established near the University is perhaps beside the point. At least the charge of godlessness at the institution that had not yet even opened had been muted somewhat by Jefferson's assertion that the existence of these religious institutions "would complete the circle of useful sciences" embraced by the University.[45]

"That Knowledge Most Useful to Us:"
A Conservative or Liberating Legacy?

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[44]Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, November 2, 1822, in Ford, ed., The Writings, X, pp. 242-244;

[45][Thomas Jefferson, Rector], Report to the President and Directors of the Literary Fund, October 7, 1822, in [Nathaniel Francis Cabell, ed.], Early History of the University of Virginia as Contained in the Letters of Thomas Jefferson and Joseph C. Cabell (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1856), pp. 475; Joseph C. Cabell to Thomas Jefferson, February 3, 1823, in ibid., pp. 272-273. See also Dumas Malone, The Sage of Monticello (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), pp. 392-393; Peterson, Jefferson and the New Nation, pp. 979-980.

"The circle of useful sciences," although Jefferson's own phrase, seems much too circumscribed and limiting to be in harmony with his dynamic concept of knowledge. Knowledge to Jefferson, like his original design of the "academical village," was open-ended, expansive, and forward looking. In a statement characteristically bold, optimistic, and defining of his ideal for the University, Jefferson proclaimed that "This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here," he said, "we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."[46]

To Jefferson, the unending path to "truth" was the unending path to useful knowledge. Knowledge that was static, that was bounded by time or space was of little or no value. And yet, there was little that Jefferson found useless--except, perhaps, for the mysticisms of Platonic philosophy and the babel of Christian orthodoxies that had been erected upon those illusive forms.

While Jefferson refused to be bound by the dead hand of the past, he nonetheless discovered value and utility in history. The rise and fall of former civilizations, he contended, held important lessons for present and future generations. He found in ancient languages models of style as well as ethical and moral teachings of enduring relevance, just as he advocated the

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[46]Thomas Jefferson to William Roscoe, December 27, 1820, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XV, p. 303.

study of modern languages for their value in broadening scientific understanding, extending commerce, and developing amiable relations with foreign countries. For one of Jefferson's disposition and curiosity, knowledge by its very definition was utilitarian. (Metaphysical or theological speculations, by contrast, dealt with the unknowable and thus were not useful or of genuine concern.)

That Jefferson stressed utility--an education that would equip republican citizens with the understandings and skills that would enable them to pursue happiness individually and as a people--would not seem to be at issue. As we have noted throughout this essay, Jefferson measured the value of every study and activity by its contribution to the happiness and prosperity of the living generation. Yet, it has been argued that this very feature of Jeffersonian educational theory has contributed to the entrenchment of an educational tradition that has served conservative rather than liberal (or liberating) ends.

This position has been articulated by, among others, Daniel Boorstin in his insightful study of the Jeffersonian quest for useful knowledge, The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson. Boorstin contended that Jefferson and others in his enlightened circle, dedicated to utilitarian ends as they were, promoted the push toward "vocationalism" in American education. Boorstin further charged that Jefferson and those who shared his views assigned to educators a largely conservative task, "namely to adjust men

to their present roles in society." Striking directly at what he considered the Achilles heel of Jeffersonian educational theory, Boorstin asserted:

> Despite all that had been said about distributing educational opportunities in the proportions in which the Creator had distributed talents among men, the large outlines of the Jeffersonian educational system were designed to prepare each individual for the practical tasks assigned him by his present place in the social hierarchy. . . . [T]he Jeffersonian demand that education give men implements immediately and obviously useful, has surely helped establish the American tradition, which combines enthusiasm for education with an insistence that education be uncritical and conservative.[47]

Boorstin's allegations are uncomfortable, perhaps even uncharitable, but not completely unjustified. One cannot study the history of American education--or reflect on the current malaise in American society--without recognizing the persistence of class structures, inequality, and the complicity of schools in the maintenance of the social and economic status quo. Indeed, a growing body of literature and disaffection on the part of increasingly larger segments of society suggest that schools are much better at selecting and sorting (or

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[47]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), pp. 222-223.

"reproducing") children in patterns remarkably similar to their parents' socio-economic background than they are at "raking geniuses from the rubbish." Nor can we assert two centuries after Jefferson began his crusade against ignorance and tyranny over the mind of man that the "artificial aristocracy" has been replaced by some sort of pure "natural aristocracy."

All this being granted, one might argue that it is much too great a leap to saddle Jefferson (or "Jeffersonians") with the burden of co-conspiracy, consciously or otherwise, in system of social repression or resignation. Boorstin is surely correct in observing that Jefferson's educational hierarchy (and his lack of sustained attention to the marginal status of women, Native Americans and African Americans) paralleled the existing social inequalities of his era. But he is also correct in his observation that the orientation of Jefferson's philosophy was futuristic. The conditions of the moment were not to be the conditions of the future. As Boorstin himself put it, "Since the hope and the fact were not yet one, the Jeffersonians had a sense of living at the beginning of history." The America that might be, that could be, was still an America yet to be.[48]

Jefferson's insistence that education that is valuable must also be useful invites a definition of utility that transcends the moment and the mundane. To "pursue happiness" in the grandest meaning of that concept, Jefferson would have us understand, requires attention to the moral, civic, and

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[48]Boorstin, p. 238.

aesthetic dimensions of life as well as to the immediately useful. In ways that Jefferson himself may not have wholly appreciated and never fully articulated, his own life underscored the fact that education is more than a means; it can also properly be an end in itself. Although Jefferson tended to measure the value of all his studies and activities on the basis of functional utility, his intellectually active mind, aesthetic sensibilities, and notions of virtue, service, and the progress of mankind all provide a remarkable example of a life that was both useful and beautiful. Stephen Bailey framed this point with notable clarity:

> [Jefferson] failed to see what his brilliant life emphasized; that beyond facilitating direct service to others, an educated life is itself a thing of beauty, a hosanna to the Almighty, and, coming full circle, by its very example, a supreme indirect service to the happiness of the entire human race.[49]

Perhaps the most appropriate summation of the usefulness and necessity of education for citizens in a republic may be to allow Jefferson, once more, to speak for himself. "If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe," Jefferson wrote in 1818, education is

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[49]Stephen K. Bailey, "The Purposes of Education," in Edith K. Mosher and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., eds., The Changing Politics of Education (Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1978), p. 12.

to be "the chief instrument in effecting it."[50] There is nothing uncritical or conservative in this conception of "that knowledge most useful to us."

[50]Thomas Jefferson to Marc-Antione Julien, July 23, 1818, in Lipscomb and Bergh, eds., The Writings, XV, p.172.